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ABSTRACT

The verbal interaction of 31 middle class early adolescent boys and their parents was analyzed in order to provide information concerning adolescent autonomy. The boys were independently and reliably classified on the basis of age, physical maturity, and intellectual level. The taped interactions were coded for interruptions, talking times, speaker sequences, and explanations. Parental behavior was curvilinearly associated with the sons' physical maturity: when adolescents are in the earliest stages of puberty (compared with prepuberal or late puberal stages) they are more often interrupted by their parents, and their parents explain themselves less often. The family interaction at this stage is more rigidly patterned and dominated by spousal discussion. These results suggest a period of familial adaptation at the time of the adolescent boy's puberal onset. Specifically, boys become more assertive as they mature, but their parents become temporarily more controlling. (Author)

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# FAMILY INTERACTION IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE

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Despite the longstanding belief that changes in parent-child relations occur sometime during the adolescent years and suggestions by both Erikson (1956) and Freud (1958) that these changes take place in part because of changes in the appearance and basic competencies of the child, relations between these two sets of transformations have not been examined directly (Hill and Steinberg, in press). The purpose of the present investigation, therefore, was to examine the independent effects of the physical and intellectual changes of early adolescence upon assertiveness, control, and deference in family interaction. I will be describing today the results of the first wave of observations in a short-term longitudinal study.

Thirty-one middle-class families were visited in their homes by two observers. Each family had two parents and an early adolescent boy who was the oldest male child in the family. The boys ranged in age from 11 to 14 years. At least one of the parents in each family was employed in management, business, or the professions.

Each triad of a father, mother, and son engaged in a family decision-making task modeled after the "unrevealed differences" procedure (Ferreira, 1963). First, each individual was given a two-page questionnaire to complete without discussing any of the questions with any other family member. The first page consisted of five multiple-choice questions concerning such family activities as selecting

a restaurant to dine in, planning a vacation, or choosing a television program to watch together. Each individual was instructed to indicate his own first and second preferences among the five choices for each question.

The second page of the questionnaire consisted of two reasoning problems adapted from Peel's book, The Nature of Adolescent Judgment (1971). These questions have been used previously in studies of adolescent cognitive development. Each question contains a one paragraph description of a series of events followed by a question of judgment which could be considered from a number of different perspectives. For example, one passage describes a collision between a plane and a tram-cable suspending a cable-car above the Alps. The respondent is asked whether the pilot of the plane is careless.

After all three individuals had completed their questionnaires, the responses were collected and new copies of the five activity questions were distributed. The observers then asked the triad to discuss all five questions and come to a family agreement on first and second preferences for the questions. The observers then turned a tape recorder on and left the room. They did not return until the family had signalled the completion of their discussion of all five questions.

While out of the room, and before hearing any family interaction, the two observers surreptitiously and independently rated the boy on a five-point scale of physical maturation. The scale was based on facial, body proportional, and coordination

characteristics, and was designed to classify the adolescents as prepuberal, that is, lacking in any overt signs of puberty; apex puberal, at the peak of the overt puberal changes; or late puberal, well-past the apex stage. This rating scale was based on the sequence of changes in the male adolescent as described by Tanner (1962) and Stolz and Stolz (1951), and in consultation with local pediatricians.

When the family finished discussing the five questions, they called the observers back into the room. The tape recorder was then turned off, and the parents' occupations and the boy's age and grade in school were ascertained. The family was then thanked for their participation.

The family interaction tapes were coded by a series of independent judges, each coding for a different variable. These variables were: talking times, interruptions, yielding to interruptions, explanations, and the sequence of speakers. The judges were blind to the age, physical maturity, and intellectual level of the adolescents. The boys' reasoning responses were classified as either concrete, that is, based solely on the information given in the passage; partially formal, some non-systematic consideration of alternative explanations; or formal, a systematic hypothetical consideration of alternative explanations.

Interjudge reliabilities were determined for all of these measures as well as for the physical rating scale on the basis of the ratings of two independent judges for at least two-thirds of the cases. The lowest reliability

coefficient was .73 and the correlations averaged .79. Discrepancies were resolved by either averaging the two judges' ratings or using the opinion of a third, independent judge.

Interruptions, yielding to interruptions, and explanations were all divided by the talking times of the individuals involved so that meaningful between-family comparisons could be made.

In order to examine the independent effects of the adolescent's age, physical maturity, and intellectual level on family interaction, a partial correlational analysis was performed. The relations between the three independent variables and the family interaction measures were also tested for significant quadratic trends.

On the whole, family interaction appears to be related to the adolescent's physical maturity and not to his age or intellectual capability. Adolescents who are more mature interrupt their parents more often and explain things less frequently. Adolescents who are at the height of the puberal changes yield to their mothers less often than do prepuberal or late puberal boys.

Parents of boys at the apex of their puberal changes interrupt their sons more often and explain things less than do parents whose boys are prepuberal or late puberal. And the sequence of speakers in the family discussions of apex puberal boys is more rigidly structured and dominated by interaction between the parents than in the families of prepuberal or late puberal boys.

These results suggest that transformations in family interaction do in fact take place during early adolescence. But what is most noteworthy is that these transformations appear to be linked to the adolescent's physical appearance and not to his chronological age or intellectual capabilities. Overt changes in the adolescent's physical appearance may function as cues to both the child and his parents to modify their patterns of interaction. These physical changes are both dramatic and abrupt. In contrast, the subtle and more gradual changes in cognitive abilities may have few immediate effects on parent-child interaction.

Male adolescents become more assertive toward their parents, as evidenced by increases in interruptions accompanied by decreases in explanations. This assertiveness develops, however, only as the male child matures physically. Interpersonal power-assertion may become more frequent in the peer interactions of the physically mature boy, and he may bring a new way of interacting home with him.

This new behavior, though, is not well-received by the adolescent's parents. They react initially with increased attempts at control. In fact, parental controls increase steadily as the adolescent approaches his apex of puberal growth. This puberal apex period is characterized by frequent parental interruptions, few explanations, and a rigid pattern of interchange dominated by husband and wife.

These controls are gradually relaxed as the adolescent

approaches the later stages of puberty. The interaction pattern becomes less structured. Parental interruptions return to their earlier level, as do parental explanations. Perhaps the parents have thrown in the towel; they have accepted their son's assertiveness, for better or for worse, as a part of a transformation in family relations whose time has come. And in the end, the adolescent who has matured physically interacts with his parents with new levels of assertiveness.

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